

# 6. Repair cafés: exploring collaborative repair

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## INTRODUCTION

Electronic and textile waste are challenging municipalities across the world (Degenstein et al., 2021). Approaches to reducing these forms of waste include designing products that last longer or that can be mended or repaired. Increasing product lifespans is one of the most effective environmental strategies. Consequently, repair is a part of a circular economy approach that aims to keep products and materials in use for a longer period (Jaeger-Erben et al., 2021; Laitala et al., 2021). However, many impediments currently frustrate consumers' ability to repair the products they own (Svensson et al., 2018). Specifically, they need access to parts, tools, diagnostics, schematics, and repair documentation. In addition, consumers need the right to repair without invalidating product warranties (Ozanne et al., 2021).

Around the world, consumers are increasingly demanding the right to repair their belongings (Hielscher & Jaeger-Erben, 2020), with growing consumer movements supporting repair and advocating for the “right to repair” through legislation (Harrabin, 2021; Hernandez et al., 2021; Madon, 2022; WasteMINZ, 2020). For instance, in New Zealand, policy advocates call for products to be more repairable, to be labelled with a repairability index, and for retailers to offer spare parts and repair services to enable self and commercial repair (Repair Café Aotearoa New Zealand [RCANZ], 2022). A recent survey in the UK showed that an overwhelming majority (81 per cent) of consumers support the right to repair electronics, including design for repair and access to spare parts and repair documentation (Restart, 2021). Along with legislation, self-repair is also supported by a number of initiatives including online fixing sites (e.g., American, <https://www.ifixit.com>), social enterprises, Restart parties (e.g., UK-based, The Restart Project), non-governmental organizations (e.g., Consumer New Zealand), and recent television programmes (e.g., UK produced *The Repair Shop*; Ahnfelt, 2016; Charter & Keiller, 2016; Graziano & Trogal, 2017).

Consumer research conceptualizes repair as a spectrum of interventions through which people seek to affect the capacities of objects in ways that correspond to their material readiness to enable routinized patterns of action (Godfrey et al., 2022). However, a sociological view considers repair as fundamentally relational in nature rather than consumers simply working on an object to ensure its function (Niskanen et al., 2021). From this perspective, repair encompasses relationships within communities, and is often expressed through collaborative forms of repair (McLaren, 2018).

A recent survey of consumers in Norway found that a large share of repairs are conducted by consumers in the home through self-repair. The main barrier hampering repair is the low price of new products, which means consumers are more likely to buy new rather than repair current products (Laitala et al., 2021). Using practice theory, Jaeger-Erben and colleagues (2021) found that the behavioural and financial costs for repair are perceived as high and that social and material settings are more likely to impede than to enable repair. They also found that novelty-seeking is an important predictor for non-repair. In clothing repair, self-repair was found to be the most common form of repair, with women being more highly engaged in self-repair practices, which increases with age (McQueen et al., 2022).

Because of the challenges to repair, and the challenges and impediments to self-repair in particular, the repair café movement began as an approach to help consumers repair their possessions, and as a practical approach to prevent unnecessary waste (Charter & Keiller, 2016; Meißner, 2021). It is estimated that there are now over 2000 repair cafés around the world. By making repair visible, repair cafés help transform the social norms around this practice, making it more acceptable, accessible, and mainstream (Madon, 2022).

Repair cafés are a form of collaborative consumption where consumers with items in need of repair work with volunteers who have repair skills to repair their broken belongings (Charter & Keiller, 2016). Repair cafés usually take the form of community events which may meet regularly or as pop-ups. Visitors are often asked for a small donation in return for the assistance provided. Some repair cafés encourage visitors to fix or mend their own goods with the guidance of experts on hand to assist (Ahnfelt, 2016; Repair Café, 2021; Rosner, 2013). In New Zealand, the site of this study, most community repair cafés are part of the RCANZ association, which supports organizers with marketing assistance and enables them to adopt best practices and share expertise. RCANZ is part of the International Repair Café movement (RCANZ, 2023).

In a survey of repair cafés, the most common items brought for repair include small kitchen appliances, lighting, clothing, bicycles, and DVD/CD players (Charter & Keiller, 2014). Participants are motivated to participate in repair cafés to keep items out of the waste stream, to support the local

community, and to meet others who care about the local community (Charter & Keiller, 2016). A recent review found that visitors to repair cafés want to prolong the lifespan of their existing products in order to avoid buying new items and to reduce waste (Moalem & Mosgaard, 2021).

Despite the recent interest in repair and repair cafés, repair is overlooked in the literature (Niskanen et al., 2021; Moalem & Mosgaard, 2021), and in consumer research in particular (Godfrey et al., 2022). There has been little research examining experts who volunteer and offer their skills and time at repair cafés. In addition, limited research explores how repair cafés are organized and marketed to facilitate collaborative repair. As part of a larger project on repair cafés, this qualitative study aims to address these gaps using Tronto's theory of care with the following research questions:

- What motivates expert volunteers and what benefits do they receive from participating in repair cafés?
- What are the impediments to collaborative repair at repair cafés?
- How do organizers facilitate collaborative repair at repair cafés?

An understanding of the motivations, benefits, and challenges experienced by volunteers and organizers, and how they enact the phases of care at repair cafés, is necessary to recruit suitable and skilled participants. Doing so ensures safe and successful events, and allows organizers to successfully market repair cafés as a form of collaborative consumption.

## BACKGROUND AND CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Care has been suggested as an ethic to guide repair work (McLaren, 2018), and has been used to identify the elements that are cared for at repair cafés (Meißner, 2021). However, there is a lack of empirical research examining care in the context of consumption (Shaw et al., 2017). This research extends previous repair research. It also contributes to consumer research by using Tronto's feminist ethic of care to understand the experiences of repair volunteers and how collaborative repair is facilitated by repair café organizers.

Care is acknowledged to be universal and omnipresent in society. It comprises caring about (something/someone) and caring for (taking responsibility for; Tronto, 2015). Care is conceptualized as “a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (Fisher & Tronto, 1990, p. 40). Thus, caring work can involve caring for the self, caring for others, and caring for the world (Nguyen et al., 2017). As

conceived by Fisher and Tronto (1990), caring is seen as a complex process with four phases identified in the processes of delivering care:

1. Caring about. During this first phase, someone or some group notices unmet caring needs.
2. Caring for. Once needs are identified, someone or some group has to take responsibility to make certain that these needs are met.
3. Caregiving. The third phase of caring requires that the actual caregiving work be done.
4. Care receiving. Once care work is done, there will be a response from the person, thing, group, animal, plant, or environment that has been cared for. Observing that response and making judgements about it. (Tronto, 2013, p. 21)

Subsequently, Tronto (2013) added a fifth phase of care:

5. Caring with. This final phase of care requires that caring needs and the ways they are met need to be consistent with democratic commitments to justice, equality, and freedom for all. (Tronto, 2013, p. 23)

Further, Tronto (2013) identifies five moral qualities that align with the five phases of care. These ethical qualities are attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, and plurality (p. 34).

In this research, the five phases of care are utilized to understand how expert volunteers consider and undertake their work at repair cafés, what impediments they experience in undertaking the care, and how the phases of care are facilitated by organizers.

## METHOD

To address these gaps and undertake this research, a qualitative approach was used that included semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Nineteen expert volunteers were interviewed from seven repair cafés across New Zealand. The RCANZ played a pivotal role in introducing the author to the repair café community, which enabled access to both volunteers and organizers. The interviews occurred between November 2021 and December 2022. Given COVID restrictions in New Zealand at the time, the interviews were conducted in both face-to-face and online settings (i.e., Zoom). A semi-structured interview guideline was prepared in advance to minimize misunderstandings due to the mixed face-to-face and online approaches, and to allow participants to elaborate on their experiences of offering repair at repair cafés. The interviews ranged from 35 to 90 minutes in length. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Also, nine individuals involved in starting and running repair cafés were interviewed to understand their motivations for starting repair cafés and the operational challenges they face, especially

in recruiting expert volunteers. Interviews with organizers were often more informal and most took place while the repair café was running; however, three organizers participated in a formal interview (Ed, Ming, and Ann). Participant observation was utilized to better understand how the repair cafés operate and the challenges expert volunteers face repairing items. Interview transcripts were systematically coded, sorted, and analysed with the aim of identifying common patterns, themes, and subthemes both within and across the interviews in a thematic analysis. Participants' names have been anonymized to protect their identity. This analysis was conducted manually to facilitate greater immersion in the data when compared to computer-based analysis tools (Shaw et al., 2017; Wood & Kroger, 2000).

## RESULTS

Expert volunteers with differing levels of participation were interviewed (1 to 10+ sessions) to capture a variety of experiences. Of the 19 expert volunteers, ten were male and nine were female. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 74 years old. Eight of the participants were retired. Participants brought a range of skills including woodworking, sewing, bicycles, small appliances, computers, and electrical. Of the organizers, seven were female and two were male. We now turn to how the five phases of care are manifest in repair cafés, supported by quotes from the data and a graphical representation of the results (Figure 6.1).

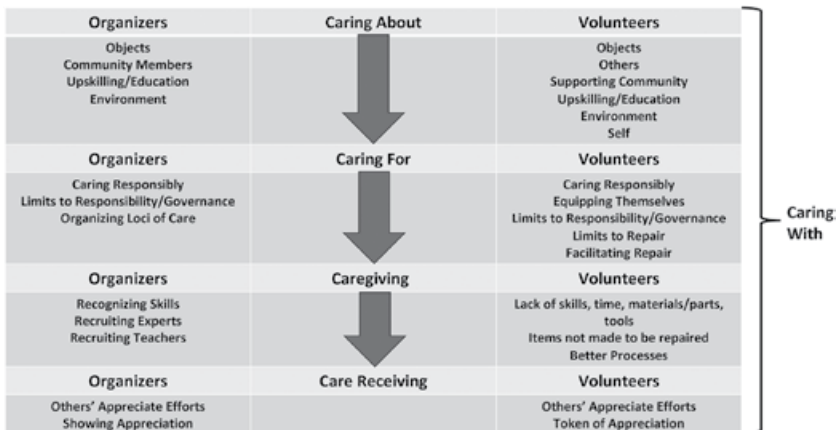


Figure 6.1 Phases of care in collaborative repair

## CARING ABOUT

In the first phase of care, an unmet need in the community must be recognized (Tronto, 2013). Both organizers and volunteers must suspend their own self-interest and become attentive to others' needs or the care needs of objects (Tronto, 2013). During this phase, we see that organizers and volunteers consider multiple caring needs and requirements of different stakeholders including objects, self, family, community, and the environment. This means they juggle a range of concerns (Shaw et al., 2017).

Organizers recognize that broken objects are in need of care to ensure that they can maintain their capacity and continue to function (Godfrey et al., 2022). Ming, who is involved in a community group that supports expatriates, sees the repair café as more than caring for objects; it is also an extension of her work to care for and support the needs of members in this organization. Consequently, she started a repair café to give her mostly elderly members a way to use their skills and feel valued. As Ming elaborated: "I want our members to use their skills to help people. You see their happiness on their face. It's quite rewarding. So my motive is to let our members, mostly seniors, do something for the community" (Ming, 72).

Like Ming, Ann (45) found that as she held more events, many women in her local community needed care and support. So, the repair café became a method for fixing their objects and imparting skills to the women to empower them to do their own repair work. The organizers also believed that the role of the repair café was to train and educate visitors to enable them to undertake repair at home. In this way, they could meet the educational needs of community members with regard to repair, so that "they can be repeated themselves" (Ed, 27). Finally, all of the organizers articulate a strong concern for the needs of the natural environment, which motivates them to organize and run repair cafés.

Expert volunteers also recognize various unmet needs in the community, which further motivates them to participate. Many recognize a need to care for both the functional and sentimental values of the objects brought in for repair (Meißner, 2021). Providing this care enables them to care for the needs of the individuals who bring these items to the café for repair, as Hazel (42) described: "And I just make people happy when I make things work for the people who care about their belongings". They also provide repair expertise to be part of supporting the needs of the wider community (Meißner, 2021). Some volunteers see giving their time and expertise as a small way to offer assistance to the organizers of the repair café. For instance, John (62) described himself as "an ardent reuse person", and wanted to support the organizers in their efforts to hold the community event. Volunteers also recognize and support the

educational needs of individuals by teaching them repair skills. Almost all the repairers recognized broader societal needs as a reason why they participate in repair cafés. These include minimizing waste, protecting the environment, and supporting a circular economy (Meißner, 2021; Niskanen et al., 2021). For instance, Linda (70) discussed her feelings in this way: “I get a lot of personal pleasure from having a small footprint”. Thus, repair allows them to meet their own personal needs of living a more sustainable lifestyle. Finally, participation in the repair café enables volunteers to care for themselves by participating in something they are good at and enjoy doing, as well as experiencing the positive feelings when they bring an item back to life. This supports Houston and colleagues’ argument that people who repair objects consider the act of repairing as having value (Houston et al., 2016).

## CARING FOR

In the second phase of care, someone or some group has to take responsibility to make certain that identified needs are met (Tronto, 2013). Organizers bear a large responsibility to organize the repair events, staff them with skilled volunteers, and ensure events run smoothly and safely, among other tasks. To ensure the safe operation of events, it is necessary that appropriately qualified volunteers be present. Most of the organizers try to ensure that there are certified electricians at each event, but this is something they often struggle to find. Ming (72) discussed her desire to continue running the repair cafés during the COVID pandemic, as well as the changes made to protect the volunteers and run events responsibly. Organizers also have to place boundaries on the level of care that can be offered at each repair event, as they are constrained by time considerations, limited tools and equipment, parts and other supplies, and the skills of the volunteers. Thus, they often specify through their marketing initiatives (e.g., flyers, Facebook, advertisements) the number of items that can be repaired, the fact that new items cannot be brought to the events, and that visitors should bring necessary parts or supplies (e.g., zips, buttons, batteries). For instance, Ming (72) noted, “Another thing we have to mention is that they don’t bring new clothing in (for hemming) ... because that’s asking for cheap labour”. A key consideration is arranging for the loci of care. Organizers often consider partnering with like-minded organizations and offering other amenities (e.g., coffee, kids’ entertainment) to encourage and make it easy for visitors to attend the repair event.

In taking on the responsibility to offer their skills, volunteers equip themselves to ensure they have the proper tools and a range of items that may be needed (e.g., spare fabric, patches, thread) to perform the repair responsibly. Some of the volunteers also see that it is necessary to indicate limits around the use of their time and skills. They do this by only working during the allotted

time of the event, not taking items home with them, and indicating when they do not have the necessary time, skills, equipment, or parts. For instance, Fran (68) described her regret at not adhering to these limits when she agreed to make an item for a repair café visitor: “We don’t make things. We repair. But the visitor asked, ‘but you could make it, couldn’t you?’” Volunteers also appreciate that the events are governed by certain rules to ensure their repair work stays within these rules (e.g., not taking things home to fix). As Ian (42) explained, “There’s very clear boundaries. I’m available at this time”. A key service volunteers perceive they offer is to indicate when items cannot be repaired. Thus, they give permission to visitors to throw these items out, and free themselves from the need to repair their item because there are limits to what is capable of being repaired. For instance, Rob (69) described his interaction with a visitor when he told them, “You can throw this away. You know, we can’t fix it”. Finally, if volunteers are not able to fix an item, they are often able to provide information about how and where it may be fixed, thus facilitating possible future repair.

## CAREGIVING

The third phase of care requires that the actual caregiving work be done (Tronto, 2013). However, the exercise of giving care is subject to potentially extensive challenges such as time and resource constraints, socialization norms, and/or conflict as to which caring needs to address (Black & Cherrier, 2010). To ensure the care work of repair is able to occur, organizers have to ensure repairers have the competence or necessary skills. Ming (72) developed a repair café focusing only on sewing and mending as she recognized those skills existed in her community. She also became attuned to the levels of competence among her repairers, and recruited Claire to run the industrial sewing machine because Claire had worked as a tailor before retiring. Surprisingly, most of the organizers find that volunteers are happy to come for a one-off event, and with the exception of electricians, they do not struggle to find volunteers. However, for those repair cafés where repair education is key, finding repairers who are able and want to teach repair skills can be more difficult.

For the volunteers, a number of impediments frustrate their ability to ensure the care work can be given during events. Volunteers point to not having sufficient skills, time, materials and parts, and tools to undertake the repair. Claire (72) discussed her frustration at not always being able to fix things well under the constraints present at the repair café. For instance, some volunteers feel they are not always competent to do the repair work in this setting (Gregson et al., 2009; Dant, 2010; Hielscher & Jaeger-Erben, 2021). This was described by Mel (49) as, it’s “above the skills that I’ve got. I’m a good amateur, smart sewer, but I’m not a tailor”. A large number of the volunteers described frustra-



tion with modern manufacturing in terms of products not being repairable. As noted by Luke (38), products are “cheap enough to be functional for a while, but they are not built to be taken apart ... they are either glued together or they’re clipped together in such a way that they are never designed to be opened or opening them is destructive”. A small number of volunteers suggest that processes at the repair café could be altered to improve how things are run, such as managing visitor expectations and directing visitors to the appropriate tables. However, most indicate these impediments are minor annoyances that do not overly detract from their experience or mean that they will not participate again.

## CARE RECEIVING

In the fourth phase of care, the care work is done and there may be a response from the person, thing, group, or other entity that has been cared for (Tronto, 2013). It is important to note that responsiveness is not always possible or likely in some circumstances (Shaw et al., 2017). Although the care receiver may be the one who responds, this may not always be the case, and others in any particular care setting may also be in a position to assess the effectiveness of the caring act(s) (Tronto, 2013). For instance, during the repair event, organizers often have the opportunity to assess the repair or the response of the visitors who have their item repaired. Organizers also believe that they have the responsibility to be responsive and show their own appreciation to the repair volunteers. They do this by offering a coffee or petrol voucher, providing food during the event or organizing a shared lunch after the event, or by providing a certificate to honour the volunteers’ work. Ming (72) discussed how she shows appreciation for volunteers: “So what we do is that every time after the sewing repair café cause... we have a lunch gathering ... We give a certificate of appreciation, and then we invite the local board chair or someone to present it”.

Because data have not yet been collected from visitors, we do not have evidence of their actual response. However, the data reflects how the volunteer repairers feel about the response of visitors. Generally, volunteers are very grateful when visitors are responsive and acknowledge their repair work with gratitude and appreciation. Many discuss how positive it makes them feel to have their efforts acknowledged, as enthused by Erin (23): “She was so engaged and thankful and expressive about the fact that the service even exists in the first place then she was really engaged in learning about how to mend”. When asked if they would like to be paid for their repair work at the repair café, none of the volunteers interviewed indicated that they would. Most feared that this would dramatically change the experience for them. In essence, they suggested that it would take repair cafés from a community event to a paid

service, where visitors would have much higher expectations and it would feel more like work. A word of thanks and an occasional gesture from the organizers was sufficient to acknowledge their time and expertise.

## CARING WITH

The fifth phase of care is less a stage of care and more of an approach to providing care throughout the other phases. Caring with describes how care should be provided among a group or organization. As described by Tronto (2013), the final phase of care requires that caring needs and the ways in which they are met should be consistent with democratic commitments to justice, equality, and freedom for all. The qualities that align with this phase of care are plurality, communication, trust, respect, and solidarity (Tronto, 2013). In particular, internal solidarity may be created during the process of mobilization through care work (Santos, 2020). Organizers describe feelings of being supported by the community, and they are very enthusiastic that community connections have been forged during the repair events. While expert volunteers describe a supportive community atmosphere, the ability to meet other like-minded community members and participate in repair cafés allows them to contribute to a community effort. Finally, Linda (70) described how the repair café events are different from other community events, as they encourage a sense of gratitude and respect from the visitors, which she appreciates.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results show that repair occurring at repair cafés can be considered a form of care that takes place across five phases (Tronto, 2013). By utilizing this framework, this research identified the motivations and benefits experienced by organizers and volunteers, the impediments to providing repair, and the tasks that organizers must pursue to successfully run and market this form of collaborative consumption. Through those care phases, care needs are identified and responsibility is assumed by organizers and volunteers to meet those care needs. Loci of care are arranged and staffed with appropriately qualified repairers, and processes are developed to deliver care. Volunteers ensure that they are properly equipped with tools and materials to undertake care during the repair events. To acknowledge the care work, organizers provide appreciative responses to volunteers who in turn indicate their appreciation for these gestures. During these care events a sense of solidarity is built among organizers, volunteers, and often with members of the community more broadly (Santos, 2020).

Like other forms of collaborative consumption, repair cafés provide a number of individual and collective benefits. As the needs of objects,

individuals, and the community are identified, responsibility can be assumed and care can be provided. For instance, organizers discuss meeting the needs of individuals in their community by providing them a venue to offer their skills, thus acknowledging their capacities and allowing them to continue to be involved and valued (Ozanne & Ozanne, 2016). Because they provide care to objects by repairing their functional and sentimental values, repair volunteers appreciate that they provide care to the owners of those objects. In addition, as objects are cared for through repair, the life of the objects is extended, minimizing waste, and contributing to the care needs of the wider natural environment. In addition, as educational needs are identified and met in the community, repair cafés build repair skills that contribute to the development of visitors' self-efficacy (Ozanne & Ozanne, 2021). As repairers practise their repair skills, they also build their own skills and feelings of self-efficacy (Niskanen et al., 2021; Ozanne & Ozanne, 2021). In addition, as social links are forged among repair community members and a sense of solidarity is built as group members practise working together on repair projects, community efficacy is developed (Ozanne & Ozanne, 2016).

However, repair cafés also confront the limits of care that can be offered at repair cafés and the repair of products more broadly. Because they are infrequent community events staffed by volunteers, repair cafés are limited by time, tools, equipment, materials, and the skills of volunteers. Thus, it is critical that organizers govern these events and communicate with visitors what can be brought, what items are likely to be repairable, what materials they should supply, and other expectations (e.g., whether items can be left, or that items will not be taken home by repairers). Because repair volunteers juggle a range of care concerns, they may be subject to conflicting care relations across multiple levels (Chatzidakis & Shaw, 2018; Shaw et al., 2017). Therefore, organizers should create rules to help volunteers negotiate those conflicts. Volunteers should be equipped to indicate the limits of their repair skills, the limits of the repair café settings in terms of time, tools and equipment, and the limits of what can actually be repaired. While volunteers may be able to direct visitors to other repair services, they often are confronted with the limitations of what can currently be repaired.

Care through repair of household items is not always possible as modern manufacturing practices have led to products that are currently irreparable. For instance, planned product obsolescence, with the goal of stimulating replacement buying by consumers, can occur by designing for limited repair, which can have detrimental environmental consequences as these items end up in landfills (Guiltinan, 2009). However, the increased interest in, and support of repair through repair cafés creates opportunities for both marketers and policy makers to facilitate repair. Marketers can provide access to help desks, repair videos, and improve distribution of replacement parts/tools, or enable and

support retail channels to provide repair (Ozanne et al., 2021). Policy makers should support repair networks by providing spaces, tools and materials, and by promoting community events such as repair cafés.

Repair cafés exist to help facilitate repair and keep still usable products out of the waste stream. They rely on volunteer experts who offer their skills for free to care for and fix other peoples' belongings. Without an understanding of the motivations, benefits, and challenges experienced by these individuals and the way they enact the phases of care at repair cafés, organizers may struggle to recruit their help, which is likely to thwart the development of this growing collaborative form of consumption. The findings of this research may also be useful to other organizations who depend on expert volunteers to offer their service, for instance docents at museums, coaches in community sports, or retired individuals who offer their skills in various education settings (e.g., University of the Third Age).

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